

Alabama's Class Politics Through The Civil War Crisis -- And Its Echoes

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Feature Essay

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In an overview of the role of “poor whites” in Alabama’s political development, and of the non-slaveholding majority of whites specifically, one cannot define a simple pattern. But two broad factors structured Alabama’s antebellum evolution. The first is the commitment to racial supremacy across all classes within the white population. The other is the strength of an intermingled regional and class resentment in the areas least dominated by slavery, commerce, and cotton production. Both concerns were strong in Alabama, but they interacted in complex ways, with a sharp disjuncture in the Civil War era. Both aspects fueled Alabama’s central role in the later civil rights confrontations, and the state’s subsequent emergence as a conservative Republican stronghold. Most recently, the state’s “populistic” heritage encouraged the favorable response to candidate and President Donald Trump.

The state’s geography largely determined these patterns. In the antebellum era, there were two main regions characterized by cotton production and slavery. The major one was the south central “black belt” which stretched across the state, from Selma to Montgomery and beyond, a region dominated by plantations. A secondary and older plantation region was in the extreme north of the state, in the Tennessee valley surrounding Huntsville. The rest of the state, particularly the mountain and piedmont areas of the north central region, and the sparsely settled “wiregrass” counties of the southeast, were numerically-dominated by white small farmers. (See appendix one.) The shorthand version was of an aristocratic cotton belt counterpoised against the democratic inclinations of the hill country, and of north Alabama in general. Wealth was strikingly concentrated in the central plantation belt, the bulk of the large slaveholdings being located there, while the whites in the non-plantation regions numerically predominated. The consequence was that the large plantation owners and urban elites couldn’t control the electorate, which generated recurrent outbreaks of small-P populism. These features are perhaps

the distinctive aspects of Alabama's development, combined with a defiance of outside sensibilities encouraged by the defense of slavery and racial hierarchy.

At statehood in 1819, a cluster of well-connected large planters in the Tennessee Valley became the state's founding fathers. Their initial dominance, and their favoritism toward the Planters' and Merchants' Bank of Huntsville, generated widespread resentment of the "Royal" faction. The beneficiary of this sentiment was governor and land speculator Israel Pickens, the improbable first tribune of the masses of the state's later-settled areas. In the 1820s, Pickens established a state bank to compete with the private banks, a policy which proved wildly profitable. For several years, the state bank and its paper money funded Alabama's governmental operations, buoying the economy and providing a utopian interlude of public spending with few taxes. It was nice while it lasted, and it contributed to the overwhelming popularity of the emergent Democratic majority—in 1828, Andrew Jackson won 90% of the state's presidential vote, he having personally wrested much of Alabama from the Creeks. But the panic of 1837 bankrupted the bank and absorbed the state's large Federal educational endowment with it. The responsibility for this disaster was mixed, and the debates over the government's role in banking sustained a lopsided two-party system for decades.

After Native American removal, as white settlement proceeded, the geographic pattern of the state's politics stabilized. The anti-Jackson Whig party became the vehicle of the rich black belt and Alabama's few cities. Whigs favored activist government to promote economic growth, and they warily resonated with the national currents of Protestant reform. They favored promoting banks, protective tariffs, and internal improvements, along with public education and the university. As J. Mills Thornton argued, they were vigorously opposed by the small farmers of the hill country, who disliked taxes and government schemes to benefit well-connected elites. Farmers widely resented the social pretensions of the slaveholding rich; they rallied to Jackson's war on the banks and monopolies, and to his unlettered and unbridled personal style. This proved a winning political formula, given the mal-distribution of wealth that slavery encouraged. Class and regional disparities fueled Democratic majorities as the party of negative government, of localism and states' rights. Democrats controlled the state, carrying every statewide contest before the Civil War. This let them impose tax policies that targeted slave property and favored small farmers. Alabama's privileged planters and merchants, at least the Whigs among them, thus experienced the odd reality of being locked out of formal

power.

Undergirding this political configuration was the state's unity on issues of race, both towards Native Americans and toward African-Americans. Indian removal opened vast tracts to both white settlement. Slavery opened avenues of upward mobility for some poorer whites, like overseers, who sometimes entered the planter class. Also, the emphasis on serving black belt areas in transportation and banking meant widespread property ownership of less productive land elsewhere. Alabama's limited antebellum industrial development also insured that few whites worked for one another. Land remained cheap in the hills, with grain for local use and livestock production predominating. Older values of study independence long remained viable in this setting. Both parties defended racial slavery as the basis of white liberty, and so long as the external threat looked manageable, citizens could divide on class-related issues. But the growing salience of slavery expansion after the Mexican War undermined the Whig emphasis on economic development and its support for an active Federal government. The Whigs went into decline in the 1850s, especially as their former northern allies were drawn into an antislavery Republican party. But the Democrats' drift toward sectional extremism and secessionism eroded the political system. They provided opponents occasional opportunities as "conservative" friends of the Union.

Even as Civil War approached, economic policy issues and the symbolism surrounding them remained important in state politics. The collapse of the Whigs, and the cotton boom of the 1850s, encouraged some Democrats to embrace economic modernization, and to favor public education and government subsidies for railroad construction. This provoked a backwoods backlash in the form of the "veto-governor" John Winston. He vetoed some thirty-odd railroad and pro-development bills, reinvigorating the Democratic crusade against monopolies and the rich. At decade's end, modernizers again passed a statewide general railroad aid bill, but the secession crisis prevented implementation. Here too, we see the prevailing pattern of the antebellum era, planter elites and urban modernizers could not impose an activist vision of government upon the state. In Governor Winston's electoral success, we again see Democratic leadership mobilizing a popular following against the elites, with the external threat to the racial order encouraging supercharged rhetoric on other issues.

Only the earthquake of secession could shake the partisan alignments that insured a Democratic popular majority. Anti-elite rhetoric remained powerful,

but the crisis propelled that sentiment in diverse directions. In the crucial 1860 presidential elections, the disunited “conservative” following maintained some strength, with the Whiggish moderate John Bell doing well in the black belt and cities. The national Democrat Steven Douglas also gained 15% of the vote, carrying several Tennessee Valley counties in a protest against the Democratic drift toward disunion. Resistance to states’ rights extremism remained a significant force, but the southern rights faction of Democrats backing John C. Breckinridge won the state with 54% of the vote. They carried most of the party’s northern Alabama strongholds, based on traditional loyalties, but the vote’s immediate aftermath shook these patterns to the core.

The national election outcome shocked white Alabamians. Abraham Lincoln’s victory as an antislavery Republican prompted alarm, with South Carolina’s secession forcing a crisis. Most whites probably favored secession in some form, but the issue opened divisions over tactics. In the December 1860 election to call a secession convention, the geographic patterns of decades dissolved. South Alabama united behind immediate secession. That is to say, the plantation areas long prone to Whiggish sectional moderation now went for disunion. In north Alabama, though, the electorate instead backed a “cooperationist” course, either cooperative secession or some ill-defined Union-saving alternative. (See appendix two). In the most isolated reaches of the hill country, cooperationist candidates won by large margins, indicating an outright rejection of secession. Alabama’s subsequent secession, and the outbreak of war, reconciled many former skeptics to the Confederate government. Other anti-secessionists lapsed into sullen noncooperation with the new regime.

During this crisis, one can still find little evidence of antislavery sentiment, still less of antiracism, but dramatic events can push people in unpredictable ways. The sense that poorer men were being railroaded by into a war by secessionist fanatics was widespread, at least in northern Alabama. The longstanding class grievances, and the localism of the hills, encouraged defeatism or outright Unionism. Margaret Storey estimates that fifteen per cent of white Alabamians backed the Union strongly. Belief or local situation trumped class, *per se*, in determining individuals’ wartime loyalties, but Unionism was strongest in the poorest reaches of northern Alabama. The geography of the conflict heightened these sentiments, especially as the war dragged on and demands by the Confederate government grew. The far northern section was occupied early by Union forces, commencing years of raids and

destruction. This meant that the region least enthusiastic about secession experienced devastation, while the plantation belt long went nearly untouched. Furthermore, draft evaders and deserters concentrated in the mountains, where capture was difficult and local sentiment often provided protection and food. Confederate measures to apprehend them drove many into outright Unionism, with some three thousand white men joining the Federal army, and still others resorted to brigandage. Outright Unionists' reliance on outside aid pushed them toward the Lincoln administration and its emancipation policy—that is to say, toward apostasy on race and Federal supremacy. They numerically dominated few counties, so when the southern soldiers finally returned home, open anti-Confederates would be converted into an imperiled minority overnight. Thus the “unconditional Unionists,” and their vulnerability to retaliation, made many into Reconstruction “scalawags.” They sought a drastic restructuring of the polity at Republican hands.

By war's end, the outright Unionists were not alone. A large minority of whites had abandoned an unpopular Confederate cause, and northern Alabama was littered with self-proclaimed Unionists, with minute distinctions in the secession crisis looming large. Even in the black belt, Whiggish “conservative” sentiment reasserted itself as defeat became likely, with a faction seeking a negotiated separate peace for Alabama. All these groups favored postwar policies designed to keep the state's Democratic and secessionist majority at bay, and to keep the authors of a ruinous war from office. The hope was that Federal power would encourage restraint, but as President Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction policies handed power into the hands of ex-Confederates, many of these disparate dissidents looked to the Republican Congress and the army for protection. As Congressional sentiment shifted toward enfranchising southern freedmen as a solution, unconditional Unionists generally backed restoring the state under the terms of the Military Reconstruction acts of 1867. (See appendix three, for the pattern of white votes for Reconstruction). So too did some former Whigs and conservatives who saw an opportunity to use the transition to advantage, like Governor Robert M. Patton, who resurrected the long-stalled railroad subsidy measures by collaborating with Congressional Reconstruction. His hope was that swift restoration of the state to the Union would restore the state's credit, and thus enable subsidy measures. And so it proved, with fiscally disastrous results. Here, then, is the class-drenched genesis of Radical Reconstruction, and of its violent overthrow: a counterrevolution that would influence the state's racial politics through the civil rights movement and

beyond.

Examining that process would take us too far afield here. We might simply say that as the Civil War's resentments cooled, white opinion reunified in opposition to black demands for equality and Federal protection. They also solidified against the Reconstruction government's activist railroad policies, and the state bankruptcy they engendered. The result was a fundamentalist Democratic surge after the 1873 depression hit, under White Line slogans of racial resentment. Redemption gave the reunited Democratic masses what they desired, small government, low taxes, and white supremacy. The additional consequence was that the Constitution of 1875 provided cotton belt elites a reservoir of captive black votes and resulting legislative overrepresentation. These were deployed thereafter as circumstances dictated, mostly to beat back agrarian demands.

The ironic outcome was that restive farmers got what they wanted in Redemption, but not what they needed. In an industrializing Alabama, with the railroad infrastructure finally built and the Birmingham district booming, negative government and low taxes served black belt planters and urban elites better than it did white farmers. This fueled Greenbacker and Populist revolts in the subsequent years. The resulting threat of insurgent, opportunistic biracial electoral coalitions was only eliminated by constitutional disfranchisement in 1901. After that, for half a century and more, the political settlement insured that lively white class politics occurred within the confines of a one-party state.

The relevance of Alabama's early political development to this outcome seems clear. From statehood on, interlocking patterns of class and region-based white dissent motivated an anti-elite style of public discourse. The Civil War disrupted the partisan expression of that sentiment, but not the inclination itself. It kept returning in such apparently inconsistent forms as the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and support for the New Deal in the subsequent decade. And so, to jump to our time, the recent Senatorial special election results, and the strength of Judge Roy Moore in the small towns and rural areas of northern Alabama, has ample precedent. Moore may have lost, but President Trump himself benefitted from this tradition of popular defiance of polite sentiment—even if now often directed at the Establishment of his own Republican party.

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